Political Terrorism: An Historical Case Study of the Italian Red Brigades

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Author Biography

Victor H. Sundquist is currently serving as a Major in the United States Army. He is presently the Officer in Charge of the Central Command (CENTCOM) Counterterrorism South Team located in San Antonio, Texas. He has served in the Armed Forces for more than 22 years both as an enlisted soldier in the 7th Infantry Division and as a commissioned officer in multiple worldwide units. He has deployed on missions throughout the world to include Operation IRAQI FREEDOM where he acted as the Brigade G-2 (Intelligence Officer) for 1st Calvary's Military Transitional Teams in Northern Iraq. He is a 1995 graduate of the United States Military Academy at West Point and is currently enrolled in the Counterterrorism Masters Program at Henley-Putnam University.

Abstract

As the world's governments become increasingly engulfed in economic and political strife, international leaders should step back and understand what historical realities enabled political extremism to surface in particular regions of the world. More important, these leaders need to recognize what past governments did to counter these movements. Global communities are currently witnessing a dynamic trend of populous uprisings that in some cases, like Greece and the United States, have the potential to severely disrupt the activities of local governments. Consequently, it behooves leaders to reflect upon historical precedence in order to avoid repeating the same mistakes of our forefathers. Accordingly, the rise and fall of the Italian Red Brigades represents a classic case study from which to understand the dynamics behind the development of a political terrorist organization and its effects on society as a whole.

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"Those who cannot learn from history are doomed to repeat it."

— George Santayana

Introduction

As the world's governments become increasingly engulfed in economic and political strife, international leaders should step back and understand what historical realities enabled political extremism to surface in particular regions of the world. More important, these leaders need to recognize what past governments did to counter these movements. Global communities are currently witnessing a dynamic trend of populous uprisings that in some cases, like Greece and the United States, have the potential to severely disrupt the activities of local governments. Consequently, it behooves leaders to reflect upon historical precedence in order to avoid repeating the same mistakes of our forefathers. Accordingly, the rise and fall of the Italian Red Brigades represents a classic case study from which to understand the dynamics behind the development of a political terrorist organization and its effects on society as a whole.

The Rise of Class Warfare in Italy

Throughout history governments have experienced the ebb and flow of social movements within their borders ranging from mundane episodes of civilian "sit-ins" to more extreme encounters of terrorist militant attacks. During the mid 1900s, the spread of Marxist Communism represented one of several forms of social collectivism that rooted itself within the fabric of European societies. Between 1960 and 1980, governments across Europe witnessed and in some cases participated in several of these types of political events. In Italy, for instance, worker and student movements rose to prominence as center-left coalition government leaders "fail[ed] to bring promised reforms to Italian society" that subsequently led to the "mass worker strikes of 1968–1970."[1] Furthermore, outdated and deteriorating university systems emboldened and in some instances radicalized

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student behaviors against union and government officials creating the necessary framework for future extremism. Inevitably, this caustic environment infused with the spread of a 1920s style Marxist-Leninist ideology led to one of Italy's most prolifically violent periods as student activist groups formed within Italy's workers' movement and subsequently advocated violence as a means to pursue class warfare.

The development of these radical organizations predominately centered around the perception that Communist organizations, like the Italian Communist Party (PCI) as well as factory trade union officials had lost sight of the original ideals set forth in the initial Communist movement. Some of these ideals involved the expanded commitment to Italian youth to broaden the availability of university level education and also the government's pledge to provide better working class conditions within the country's factories. Consequently, as these areas of government commitment to the people began to wane, so too did the people's commitment to the Italian Government to preserve social order within the current political framework. For instance, Italian student activists viewed cooperation between Communist party leaders and Christian Democratic officials as a political statement of non-support to the working class society as many of the instituted policies were perceived as detrimental to the protection of the factory workers.

To further complicate matters, the prior de-Stalinization of the Soviet Union had helped ease Cold War tensions between Western influences and European Communists. This phenomenon provided Italian business owners the opportunity to mesh communist business strategies with that of capitalist models. Western business philosophies, however, were seen by some as one of the root causes of increased disparities between trade workers and union leaders as company owners utilized advancing technologies in their factories at the expense of the work force. The rising tensions between factory workers and trade union leaders, mixed with the growing discontent of frustrated and alienated university students, eventually led to the formation of several ultra-left radical groups. One of these groups, the Red Brigade, would leave its mark in history as one of Italy's most dominant and violent extremist organizations the country had seen since World War II, and would prove as difficult to eventually track down and dismantle.

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Formation and Ideologies (1969–1972)

The Red Brigade, more commonly referred to in Italian as the Brigate Rosse (BR), was officially formed on October 20, 1970 by University of Trento activist student Renato Curcio along with his girlfriend Mara Cagol and his activist friend Alberto Franceschini.[2] This ultra-leftist group emerged from the rank and file of the 1960s worker and student protest movements where they claimed support for the local trade unions in their fight against the right-wing political bourgeoisie. The Red Brigade initially directed their efforts in the larger Italian cities of Milan and Turin where they viewed themselves as offshoots of the *Autonomia Operaia* (AO) extra-parliamentary movement. Acting as a faction of this larger, fragmented political movement, group leaders tended to "operate mainly in the factories, where social disparities were more evident and labor disputes more acute."[3] Group leaders, however, advocated for the creation of a revolutionary state through the use of armed struggle in order to create a split between the Italian Government and other Western Alliances.[4] Because of the group's disdain toward the union leadership's treatment of local factory workers, as well as the government's capitulation in solving important social issues, many of the early ideological goals of the leadership involved targeted attacks on "the establishment" such as unionists, politicians, and businessmen.

In late 1971, Red Brigade group motivations forced a shift in its internal terrorist tactics from a tactical viewpoint to more of a strategic approach as members evolved from the participation in the local destruction of union leader's vehicles and factory equipment to broader attacks against union headquarters and business offices. Inevitably, this tactical shift would also push the group's extremist operations into the world of human targeting as brigade members claimed responsibility for the organization's first kidnapping in March 1972 of factory foreman Sit Siemens.[5] Slowly the Red Brigade developed a reputation throughout Italy as one of the most solid and consistent leftist ideological extremist groups in Europe. As stated by Donatella della Porta in *Terrorism in Context*, the Red Brigade's Marxist-Leninist ideology became more prevalent as group documents surfaced indicating that, "the working class [was] the revolutionary subject, the capitalist system [was] the enemy, the state [was] the guard dog of the bourgeoisie, and [the] Christian Democracy [was] its party."[6] The Red Brigade, in essence, was attempting to broaden its military and political platform along a more national framework by attempting to legitimize its political and physical retribution tactics against the right wing.

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Example Red Brigade Structure
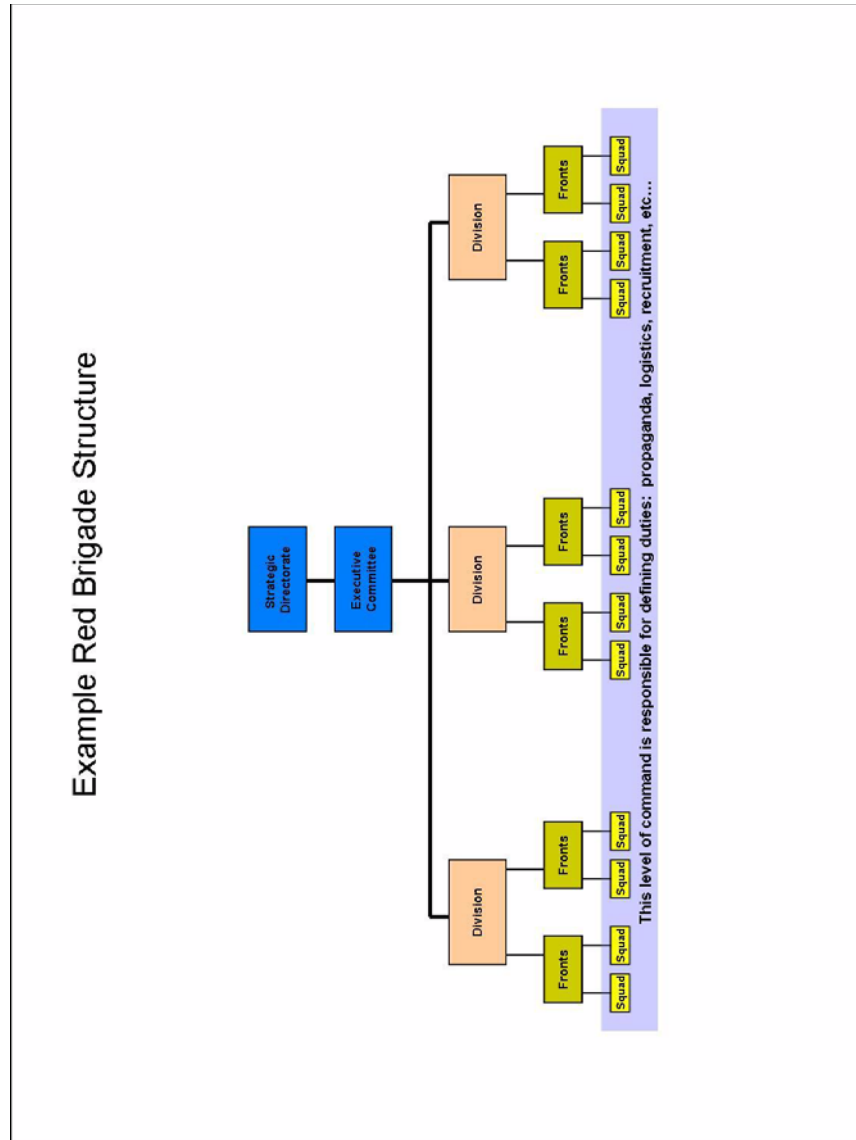
Group Structure Development (1973–1974)

Red Brigade leaders consistently viewed themselves and their ideologies as the standard-bearers of the Marxist-Leninist Communist movement. The group saw their actions as an "armed avant-garde (forward guard) working within the proletariat in order to establish a [political] party."[7] Consequently, brigade leaders in 1974 developed the Strategic Directorate (DS) that was responsible for establishing the Red Brigade's organizational structure consisting of an Executive Committee, urban and regional divisions (*colonne*), and brigade fronts (*fronti*). The initial structure of the BR was similar to the organizational layout of an Army unit. For instance, the Strategic Directorate acted much like a military command element in that it established protocols and guidelines for the entire organization to follow. The Executive Committee, in turn, functioned as a headquarters staff element by publishing the command guidelines and ensuring that the day-to-day operations of the organization ran smoothly.

The Red Brigade "field unit" structure consisted of urban and regional divisions that were designed to break down command and control of the organization along specific boundary lines. Within each of the regions or urban commands (divisions), the BR further established "front" elements that were responsible for defined duties like logistics, propaganda, and recruitment activities. Each of these "front" elements and command divisions reported up a vertical chain of command to the Executive Committee and eventually to the Strategic Directorate (DS). This compartmentalized structure essentially enabled all decision making processes to originate at the DS level while maintaining a secretive wall between division and urban command operations. Eventually this rigidly clandestine command structure would require a more formal means to communicate the leadership's overarching and changing objectives as the previous use of loose networks within the factory communities had outgrown its effectiveness.

Group Doctrine Development (1974–1975)

Brigade leaders subsequently published their first doctrine "manifesto" in 1975 with the development of the Resolution of Strategic Directorate (RDS) that helped define the organization's goals and objectives. Strictly speaking, the RDS defined the group's goal as a "concentrated strike against the heart of the State because the [S]tate is an imperialist collection of multinational corporations."[8] This manifesto in essence gave justification and clear guidance for some of the group's earlier political targets within the Italian Democratic Christian Party to include the 1974 murders

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of two Italian Social Movement activists. More important, this document helped solidify the group's reasoning for targeting local police and legal authorities in an effort to enhance their terror operations in the urban areas.

The new RDS doctrine also represented a major shift in the group's original ideology of supporting local political activities of the broader worker's movement. The group manifesto essentially realigned the Red Brigade organization into a more nationalistic militant movement aligned against regional authorities as well as the Italian State. Unfortunately, this aggressive militant approach bore more resemblance to an anarchist style organization than an emerging political movement. The group's ensuing attacks and brutal tactics eventually chipped away at their support base as many sympathizers felt increasingly isolated from the group's new ideological beliefs.

The Red Brigade's doctrinal shift along with the group's past terrorist activities inevitably forced Italian officials to redirect their counterterrorism efforts against the organization's leadership and its operational networks. As a result of the increased Italian security pressure on the group, by late 1976 many of the original members, including Renalto Curcio and Alberto Franceschini, were in police custody. Many speculated, including Curcio and Franceschini, that their arrests were the result of alleged internal group turncoats, Mario Moretti and Giovanni Senzani, who they believed worked for the United States Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) and Italian Security Services.[9] Furthermore, Mara Cagol, Renalto Curcio's wife and one of the original founders, was subsequently killed by police during a struggle shortly after her arrest. These arrests along with Italian authority's systematic counterterrorism response to the Red Brigade effectively enabled the government to initially quiet the militant activities of the original leaders. The Italian Government's inability to completely dismantle the Red Brigade's mid-level leadership, however, led to the eventual consolidation and development of the remaining BR members into a more violent, well disciplined, and radicalized organization that would soon propel itself into the Italian national spotlight.

Group Transition Period (1976–1984)

By 1976, terrorist activity in Italy had, "expanded so rapidly that it overshadowed all other West European countries."[10] In some social corners this expansion of violence was primarily viewed as the result of the United State's indirect involvement in anti-Communist destabilizing operations. Furthermore, the "shadow wars" being fought in the Italian cities between

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Cold War powers were beginning to lead many locals to believe spurious rumors that the current government was close to collapse.[11] Fortunately for the Red Brigade, the ideological battle between social policies enabled the group to expand its recruitment activities away from the working middle class areas to the intellectual corridors of the regional universities. This fresh intellectual influence into the ranks would eventually lead the Red Brigade's Strategic Directorate under the leadership of Mario Moretti to declare in the spring of 1977 that its working class advanced guard (avant-garde) was effectively in place and that "the time had come to set up the Communist Combatant Party (PCC)" in order to guide the working class to the next political level.[12] Internal group strife during this organizational realignment, however, had forced the Red Brigade to splinter into two factions, the First Position (*Prima Posizione*) and the Second Position (*Seconda Posizione*).[13] One faction, the First Position was seen as the more violent of the two offshoots and focused a bulk of its efforts on engaging the government security apparatus.[14] The Second Position was a more moderate faction and would eventually wither away leaving the extremist viewpoint as the dominant force within the new organization. Eventually this transition within the Red Brigade, coupled with the group's increase in new intellectual recruits, laid the foundation for an organizational evolution that fostered a violent escalation of armed political activity that culminated in the 1978 kidnapping and assassination of Italian Prime Minister Aldo Moro.

The Beginning of the End (The Aldo Moro Episode)

At the time of Aldo Moro's kidnapping, the Red Brigade was not viewed as a national threat to the Italian Government; rather, they were viewed as just another leftist terror organization claiming to represent working class citizens. In fact, past counterterrorism activities had targeted the original brigade leadership, and had effectively killed or captured all founding members. Unfortunately, the reorganization that followed rendered a smaller yet more potent radical group that was not afraid to escalate violence to the next level. The result of this new violent approach was quickly seen on March 16, 1978 when Red Brigade members abducted Prime Minster Aldo Moro after ambushing his car, killing his chauffer and five policemen.[15] This attack ironically occurred as Moro made his way to work in order to submit a plan that would have stabilized Italian politics by including the Communists in the government for the first time in the nation's history. The kidnapping did not represent the first time brigade members had targeted a person, yet it represented the first instance that a high level government official had been abducted by a leftist terror organization in Italy. This incident also gave the Red Brigade a national stage

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from which the organization spent the next 55 days trying to convince the Christian Democrats to accept the group's terms for exchanging Mr. Moro for ransom and the release of 16 brigade members.

To the dismay of the Red Brigade kidnappers, neither Italian Government officials nor Christian Democratic leaders would accept the group's terms or open direct dialogue with any of the brigade members. The historical thought behind the refusal to negotiate is possibly rooted in the theory that Aldo Moro was privy to information that would expose *Operation Gladio*, which was a CIA plot, in connection with Italian police, to collapse the Communist movement using secret "stay behind" agents.[16] This theory was further fueled by a later BBC interview with Italian Interior Minister Francesco Cossiga who stated, "Aldo Moro's death still weighs heavily on the Christian Democrats as does the decision I came to, which turned my hair white, to practically sacrifice Moro to save the Republic." The waiting game unfortunately ended when Red Brigade leader, Mario Moretti, allegedly shot the Prime Minister 11 times killing him in the back seat of a car.[17]

The assassination stunned the Italian population who adored Aldo Moro, and ultimately led to the downfall of the group as popular support for the leftist cause began to wane. Immediately following the death of the Prime Minister, Italian authorities and politicians alike took stock of the horrific situation and decided to wage an all-out war against the leftist network. The Italian Government viewed the Red Brigade attacks as a serious threat to the current regime and swore to take whatever actions were necessary in order to stabilize the situation. Imprisoned Red Brigade founders Curcio and Franceschini also accused Moretti of "bureaucratic and militaristic aberrations" that did nothing to advance the cause of the proletariat.[18] Inevitably, pressure from Italian security forces who waged an effective information and military campaign against the terrorist organization mixed with the demise of popular support for the leftist movement led to the defeat of the Red Brigade group. This violent chapter in Italian history would eventually come to an end during the early 1980s; however, the Red Brigade would test its militant capabilities one last time before the group would fade away.

The Dozier Kidnapping

On December 17, 1981, North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) Deputy Chief of Staff General James Dozier was abducted from his Verona apartment by four Red Brigade members posing as plumbers. The kidnapping of General Dozier represented both a tactical and a strategic shift

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for the Red Brigade as it depicted the first time the group had targeted a foreign national.[19] Subsequent demands by the group included a condemnation of U.S. military forces along with NATO, and further promoted the ideology of all European revolutionary forces joining in a fight on an international scale. Brigade members quickly put General Dozier on trial and released a 188-page document that outlined the group's strategic goals. Fortunately, Italian police were able to locate and rescue General Dozier 42 days after his capture. For Red Brigade members, this episode represented the last successful major attack of their organization. The kidnapping of an American General Officer consequently brought swift action against the organization from both Italian and NATO security forces. Eventually, Red Brigade members were either killed, arrested, or chose to quietly dissolve back into society to attempt to reorganize the group. The ideologies of the original Red Brigade, however, did not disappear as witnessed by the emergence of an offshoot organization in 1984 conveniently named the New Red Brigade.

The New Red Brigade (1984)

The New Red Brigade, also known as the Communist Combatant Party (BR/PCC), surfaced in 1984 following the demise of the original organization. The BR/PCC was also a Marxist-Leninist group that promoted the ideology of, "continuing [the] struggle between capitalist imperialism and the oppressed proletariat."[20] The group's ultimate goals included, "the destruction of democracy and the creation of a new society through armed militant action."[21] The New Red Brigade also extended its opposition to include Italy's foreign policies involving NATO. Some of this opposition centered in the idea that Italy's Government was merely a puppet state for external western powers. The group subsequently considered the Italian Government its ideological enemy. Consequently, many of the BR/PCC's targets included high ranking Italian political and business leaders, as well as foreign policy officials. Past comments by group leaders in 2002 commending the September 11, 2001 terrorist attacks brought added attention to the organization from United States intelligence agencies. Still, the U.S. State Department did not officially designate the New Red Brigade as a Foreign Terrorist Organization. The State Department instead listed the group on the 2002 and 2003 terrorist watch lists, and currently lists the BR/PCC on its "Other Terrorist Group" list.[22]

Unlike the Red Brigades, the BR/PCC did not become involved in kidnappings as a means to spread its ideology or to create anxiety in the public domain. The new organization, however, did continue to implement the tactical use of assassinations and terrorist bombings to create chaos in the
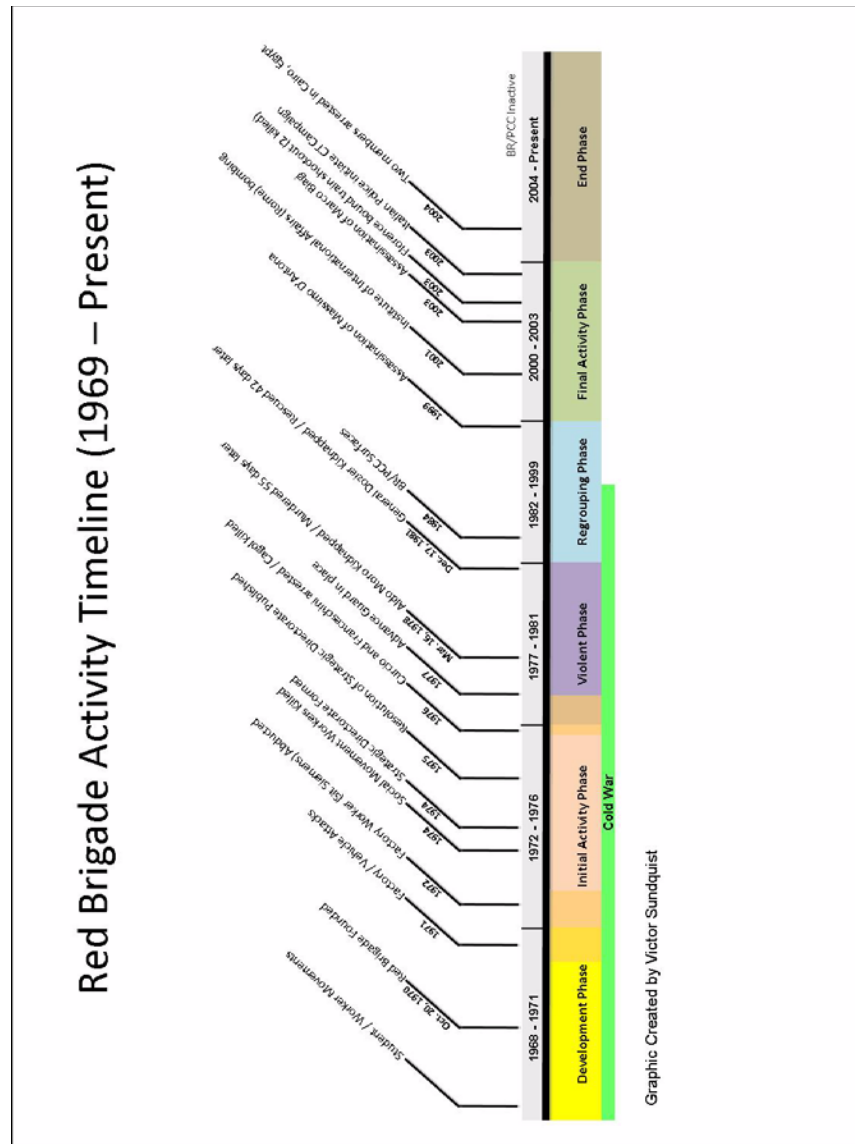
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local Italian communities in order to demonstrate a lack of security by the government. The first known instance of attacks by the BR/PCC took place in May of 1999 when group members assassinated Italy's Labor Ministry Advisor Massimo D'Antona.[23] Additionally, in April 2001, the BR/PCC bombed the Institute for International Affairs in Rome, an attack that, fortunately, did not kill anyone. The following year in March, group members targeted and killed Labor Ministry Advisor Marco Biagi.[24] Although BR/PCC activity had started to increase in earlier years, 2003 would prove to be the culmination point for the New Red Brigade and Italian authorities. For instance, in March an Italian security guard was killed along with BR/PCC leader, Mario Galesi, during a shootout on a Florence-bound passenger train. The incident also led to the arrest of another BR/PCC leader, Desdemona Lioce, "who had been fleeing Italian authorities since 1995 and had been implicated in the assassination of Massimo D'Antona in 1999."[25] Interestingly, the subsequent raid on Massimo's apartment by Italian police produced weapons ranging from pistols and hand grenades to high-level explosives that were thought to have originated from earlier ties with the Palestinian Liberation Organization (PLO).

The Final Italian Response (2003)

The rise in extremist activity quickly heightened the concerns of the Italian public who remembered the days when the original Red Brigade organization created havoc throughout the country. The Italian authorities consequently decided to intensify and expand their counterterrorism operations against the BR/PCC and its networks. These increased operations included a robust media campaign coupled with increased funding for source payments. The new Italian counterterrorism approach not only enabled the authorities to create an effective barrier between the extremist group and the public, but also allowed police to infiltrate and breakdown the BR/PCC network relatively quickly. In fact, a 2003 United States Congressional Issue Brief indicated that the Italian rewards for information program was, "instrumental in Italy destroying the Red Brigades."[26] The tactic essentially enabled police to identify BR/PCC members, map the networks, and aggressively prevent future attacks by arresting all known members of the terrorist group. Italian counterterrorism efforts ultimately paid off with the October 2003 arrests of six BR/PCC members connected to the March 2003 passenger train attacks. Two more group members who were subsequently arrested in Cairo, Egypt in January 2004, were believed to be linked to the notorious 1978 Aldo Moro kidnapping and murder.

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The Italian Government demonstrated the capability and resolve to deal a severe blow to the BR/PCC organization. The authorities effectively dismantled the group, and forced a decrease in membership within the BR/PCC rank and file to a reported 20 members.[27] Over time the remaining Red Brigade followers would try to combine their efforts with other notable leftist groups like the Anti-Imperialist Territorial Nuclei (NTA) in order to consolidate efforts for future attacks. Ideological divisions within the ranks, however, would ultimately lead to a significantly weakened organization that, to this day, shows little ability to promote the original Leninist-Marxist movement.

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Red Brigade Activity Timeline (1969 – Present)

Graphic Created by Victor Sundquist

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Conclusion

The rise and fall of the Red Brigade along with the Italian response to the terrorist organization is clearly a case study that all counterterrorism analysis should study and understand because it depicts a successful government response to a militant political ideology. The Red Brigade effectively became known as one of the only left-wing extremist organizations that nearly caused the collapse of a modern day government. As a group of highly motivated and disciplined student and worker activists, the Red Brigades were able to effectively harness the post World War II emotions surrounding perceived government intrusions into worker's rights, and inter-relate their brand of Marxist ideologies with class warfare tactics in order to rally popular support behind their cause.

As with any political movement, popular support is required in order for the movement to exist and inevitably expand. The terrorist activities of the Red Brigade were no different. From robberies to bombings, and assassinations to kidnappings, the Red Brigade gradually ascended to the top of the terrorist food chain by articulating a message of support to the broader public while attacking the Government. The group's actions would ultimately lead to their inevitable demise as their eventual targets included beloved members of the Italian political elite and ranking officers of a Western superpower. In the end, the strategic failure of the Red Brigade was the result of a virtual split between the organization and the public created by Italian police who incorporated informational operations with a new counterterrorism tactic of "money for information." Consequently, the political will of the people eventually outlasted the ideological desire of the Red Brigade leaders causing the public to ultimately see the group for what it represented: terrorism.

About the Author

Victor H. Sundquist is currently serving as a Major in the United States Army. He is presently the Officer in Charge of the Central Command (CENTCOM) Counterterrorism South Team located in San Antonio, Texas. He has served in the Armed Forces for more than 22 years both as an enlisted soldier in the 7th Infantry Division and as a commissioned officer in multiple worldwide units. He has deployed on missions throughout the world to include Operation IRAQI FREEDOM where he acted as the Brigade G-2 (Intelligence Officer) for 1st Calvary's Military Transitional Teams in Northern Iraq. He is a 1995 graduate of the United States Military Academy at West Point and is currently enrolled in the Counterterrorism Masters Program at Henley-Putnam University.

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